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ABSTRACT

The study reported in this paper attempted to find out what evidences of active learning were displayed in the "ready," i.e., prompt and appropriate responses called for in classroom oral communication. Such an inquiry leads toward the claim that the learning process itself is a suitable arena for evaluation, and thus that the evaluation of written and oral communication practices provide acceptable evidence of disciplinary learning. To test this assertion, a college composition class was instructed to discuss the "Japanese idea of beauty," and written transcripts were made of the oral discussions. Students were also given reading assignments on the subject and were required to write short papers. Two oral discussions and 14 written papers were examined. From an analysis of the transcripts and papers, six categories, each representing a certain kind of learning process, emerged: (1) synthesizing outside material; (2) linking ideas together; (3) discovering contradictions; (4) suggesting qualifications; (5) internalizing; and (6) tentativeness. Analysis of these categories indicates that important intellectual processes defined as "readiness" may be observed in oral classroom discussion, and may be seen as representations of active learning. If encouraging synthesis of ideas is an educational objective, evidence of it is present in oral interaction. If the aim is to promote contradiction and challenge, tentativeness and exploration, internalization and commitment, educators can look to class discussions for signs of success. (SG)

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CONFERENCE MAKETH A READY PERSON:

A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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CONFERENCE MAKETH A READY PERSON: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

Both writing across the curriculum and speaking across the curriculum embody an effort to transcend passive learning by involving students actively in communication processes.

Francis Bacon, in his essay "On Studies," aphoristically suggested that reading, discussion, and writing each had distinctive developmental characteristics: "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man." In the context of oral communication, readiness implies alacrity as well as appropriateness of discourse and response. We are thus led to inquire how this"readiness" which is a presumable product of conference or discussion might be manifested in the classroom and how it might be interpreted.

The purpose of this preliminary study was to find out what evidences of active learning were displayed in the ready (prompt and appropriate) responses called for in classroom oral communication. In other words, we attempted to discover in student contributions to oral discussion evidences of intellectual processing of substantive materials in a classroom.

In so doing, we are leading toward the claim that the learning process itself is a suitable arena for evaluation and thus that the evaluation of communication practices, written and oral, provides acceptable evidence of disciplinary learning. You can judge how well students understand anything by the way they talk about it.

This claim has not been substantially examined. The relationship between domain-specific and strategic (including rhetorical) knowledge has been reviewed by Alexander and Judy, who conclude with the lament that calls for examination of this interaction "have gone largely unheeded" (399). Still, intuitively, strategies help one to use knowledge, and knowledge is necessary to employ strategies effectively. Perkins and Salomon, in reviewing research on the similar intersection of cognitive skills and disciplinary knowledge, conclude that "general and specialized knowledge function in close partnership" (16). More optimistic, they see the exploration of that intersection as "one of the more exciting stories of the next decade" (24).

After defining readiness as representing prompt and appropriate responses in discourse, we might set forth a continuum of readiness according to common classroom communication modes. This continuum might extend along the following axis: (1) formal paper, (2) oral report, (3) journal writing, (4) written examination, and (5) class discussion. The axis thus represents degrees of immediacy and adaption in verbal response.

In the present investigation, we will use a formal paper as a gauge to see whether manifestations of active learning take the same form there as in class discussion (at the other end of the continuum). Since we are here interested in speaking and writing, our investigation supplements the oral transcripts with written samples in the realization that overlap between them is inherent.

PROCEDURE

This investigation has had several phases so far, in each of which both writing and speaking phenomena were explored. For example, in one phase, in a class which had been studying research methods, an examination was conducted in writing for half of the class and as a round-table discussion for the other half. The manifest objective, evaluation through examination, was kept constant, with the same questions being used as prompts in each situation.

The phase we will report here analyzed the communication patterns in two classroom discussions of "The Japanese idea of "beauty." The individuals in the discussions were also given readings on the subject and were required to write short papers on it.

Written transcripts were made of the oral discussions. In the content analysis of both written and oral discourse, categories which appeared to represent active intellectual processing were for the most part allowed to emerge from the phenomena. As preliminary category suggestions, the central set of skills was employed from Benjamin Bloom's influential Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Another was derived from the Woditsch (as quoted on Gamson and Associates) components of generic skills. Also references were the "categories of meaning" which emerged in a study by MacDonald. Such taxonomies were employed as general guides rather than as mandatory categories by the analysts in the present investigation.

ANALYSIS

An analysis of the transcripts of class discussions and of papers written by students produced six categories in which similarities and differences might be observed. Each of these categories represented a certain kind of learning process which might be subject to evaluation.

The six categories include (1) sythesizing outside material, (2) linking ideas together, (3) discovering contradictions, (4) suggesting qualifications, (5) internalizing, and (6) tentativeness.

(1) Synthesizing Outside Material

In Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, the level of synthesis is characterized by the ability of the student to relate material learned in other contexts to the current matter under consideration. In the discussion transcripts, examples of such introduction of outside materials occurred in both groups. The instances adduced from "other contexts" in these discussions were drawn largely from media and personal observation. Examples included

"From people I have met who have just moved into Greencastle, Japanese, like students in our high school. They seem like once they start something they have got to get it finished. It's like, they're careful about what they do. They're picky that it gets done and gets done right." (Female, Group 1)

"We have a lot of Japanese art in our home. My mom is big on Japanese pots and things." (Male, Group 2)

"I was reading that translation from theirs is tough. They use the same sentence pattern over and over again. When people try to translate it, they get bogged down in the sentence structure." (Make, Group 2)

In such cases the intellectual strategy which may be recognized manifestly represents readiness, an ability to see the relevance of cognitive and experiential materials not covered in the reading and to use it in the discussion.

It should be noted that the papers written by the students also utilized unassigned materials. The latter materials were taken almost exclusively from auxiliary reading and submitted with full citations. Thus synthesis was apparent in written as well as oral processing of the ideas concerning Japanese beauty.

The distinction which therefore might be worth pursuing is that the outside material in the discussions was drawn from within the immediate experience and knowledge of the students, while on the papers the resources were external to the writer.

(2) Linking Ideas Together

Another important component of synthesis as an educational objective is the appropriate combination and association of ideas and data. Do students see any relationships among the concepts to which they are exposed? Can they put them together? In a class discussion, are they reacting to what other people are saying?

In the discussions recorded here, the linkages were

easily observed, although they tended not to be directed toward larger or more fundamental syntheses. They for the most part simply indicated a recognition of a connection between one contribution and another. Not infrequently this was in the form of an agreement and therefore did not get much beyond a certain repetitiveness. Repetition itself might well be explored further for its intellectual function, as in the development of consensus, for instance. In any event, a sampling of linkages expressed in these discussions included the following:

"I agree with JoAnne about material things." (Female, Group 2)

"I think poetry's the same way." (Female, Group 1)

"They keep it simple so they can, as Tamika said, think about it." (Female, Group 1)

Linkages were evidence in the written compositions as well. "Basically the Japanese find beauty through words of wisdom and words that paint pictures, which is similar to art which is also found beautiful in Japan." In this way similarities or analogies suggest connections. Also appearing in written compositions were associations similar to those in the discussions, as in a comment that "The ideas previously discussed were also talked about in Essays in Idleness." Relatively formal introductions and conclusions in written papers seem to permit overviews which are synthetic in nature as well. In the oral discussions recorded here, such overviews appeared less explicitly expressed.

(3) Antithesis: Discovering Contradictions

Easy to spot in both group sessions were instances when students detected contradictions or anomalies, leading them in effect to a dialectic of oppositions. The material which they had stored turned out to be incompatible, producing dissonance which they expressed in their contributions to the discussion. Examples were rather dramatic.

"I thought after reading the Buddhist scriptures and then reading the Essays in Idleness, that seems similar to them. They seem like things that Japanese people would do. But it's not represented to us in that way. In, you know, like the media or in society, we think of the Japanese as, you know, making cars and building nice buildings, and you don't think of it as a natural form. But that's what these books led us to believe." (Male, Group 1)

"The more I read in this, and the more I thought I previously knew, it's pretty much the opposite. I mean, I always see the Japanese as very meticulous, and want things just their own certain way. And this, once again, they just let things go, and it's beautiful. And they've got those trees in their garden, and they train them, and they clip them, and tie them back and bend them so they can get them in a certain shape and everything. That's not letting them go." (Female, Group 1)

"Well, you could disagree with that and look at Tokyo. They have lots of highrise buildings and stuff like that, like we do. . . . Somebody has to think over there that things like that are beautiful or they wouldn't build them." (Male, Group 2)

In each case a discrepancy is discovered, and expressed, between what the students had read and their impressions based on previous acquaintance with the subject.

This phenomenon is in startling contrast with the papers produced by the same students. Never once was anything they had read disputed nor were any contradictions pointed out. This does not obviate the possibility that students settled

such disputes in a pre-writing stage before they set forth their ultimate judgments in writing, but the writing in the present cases did not in any event capture that process.

(4) Suggesting Qualifications

Not all of the thought processes proceeded according to a dialectic of contradiction. Equally observable were student efforts to qualify and modify contentions and theses, or to explain the complexities or ambiguities they contained. This tactic is a move away from over-simplifying and recognizes the complexity of the material. When reservations appear they may be said to represent a more sophisticated grasp of the substantive material, as reflected in the kinds of statements which are made about it.

In the discussion transcripts, these contributions were largely in the form of reservations or qualifications. Students resisted making generalizations which were too sweeping or constructing links which were too absolute. Some examples of this kind of thinking were apparent:

"I think different kinds of people would find different kinds of beauty." (Female, Group 2)

"It's hard to study a culture that's Westernizing so rapidly." (Female, Group 2)

"So a lot of things are the same. I just think they put more emphasis on nature and we put more emphasis on material things." (Male, Group 2)

Qualifications and reservations were relatively rarer in the written papers. In one case we found a sentence which

said, "The Japanese thoughts on beauty are very diverse also," and in another, "It is interesting to note how varied the views are for the definition of beauty between men and women," but most assertions were not qualified even to that extent. The continuous discourse of writing would seem to provide the opportunity for greater complexity in the development of an idea, but the oral discussions in this case apparently brought on just as much or more such consideration.

(5) Internalizing

One striking feature of the oral discussions recorded for this study was the ubiquitous presence of personal pronouns. Students personalized their contributions by prefacing them with phrases such as "I think."

The use of the first person singular may be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, it may indicate an earlier stage of the intellectual process where thought has not yet been objectified in an academic manner, in which case it might be regarded as a deficiency. On the other hand, this usage may indicate an involvement and internalization through which the material being reported is being assimilated into the student's personal thought processes. In that case, it may represent either an advance or at least a special kind of grasp of this material. Beyond some of the pronoun usage reflected in quotations already given, others were straightforward reactions to almost any kind of remark:

9

"I'm sure some individuals . . . ." (Female, Group 2)

"I respect the Japanese idea of beauty . . . " (Male, Group 2)

"I think in our discussion . . . ." (Male, group 2)

"I think no matter what . . . ." (Male, Group 1)

Another stark contrast with written presentations exists in this realm. While the phrase "I think" was heard a total of 18 times in two half-hour discussions, it was used only twice in fourteen papers written on the same subject. (One essayist used "I feel.") A similar proportion existed with regard to the pronoun "I" itself. "I" almost never appeared in the writing; it occurred in more than half of the contributions in the oral discussions. Certainly one explanation might reside in the norms of the two types of discourse. The "I think" may be implicit in all writing. Still, we may be on to some other intellectual factor worth exploring. Is there some kind of commitment to knowledge that is especially active in a discussion situation?

(6) Tentativeness

The exercise of tentativeness in processing information may indicate a refinement worth rewarding. Do we know what we don't know? Do we express a certain reticence while setting forth our views?

In the discussion situations observed in this study, manifest hesitations persistently indicated that thought had not been finalized. Of course, since many of these

indications were in the form of "I don't know," they could also well be interpreted as signs of ignorance rather than of dawning awareness. Still, they are signs which occur frequently enough to be worth exploring. We may note some examples:

"I think it follows very well. Jeez, I don't know." (Male, Group 2)

"Yeah, I'm still thinking." (Male, Group 2)

"I don't know. It's kind of the attitude." (Female, Group 1)

"Does that make sense?" (Female, group 1)

"I wonder, do they practice that in modern day Japan now?" (Female, Group 1)

No such reticence manifested itself in the versions of student thought recorded in their papers. They absolutely never in that format said "I wonder" or "I don't know" or "Does that make sense?" One may speculate that the individuals were less prepared for the discussions than for the papers, and thus legitimately more tentative, although in this case they wrote the papers before they discussed. Or one may surmise that the norms for written papers call for rhetoric which is more didactic, more finished, more complete. I don't know. Does that make sense?

DISCUSSION

In this exploratory study, two oral group discussions and 14 written papers were examined to discover discourse feature which would reflect an intellectual grasp of subject

matter through the "readiness" of students to express and adapt their knowledge appropriately. We asked whether we can find out how well students have learned a subject by listening to them talk.

The six discourse features identified for purposes of this analysis were (1) synthesizing outside material, (2) linking ideas together, (3) discovering contradictions, (4) suggesting qualifications, (5) internalizing, and (6) tentativeness. Each of these features may represent signs of intellectual processing based on understanding of subject matter, or thought in action.

Discovering contradictions, for instance, between what one has learned from two different sources (the third category examined above) is an intellectual skill based upon disciplinary understanding. A "ready" student can quickly retrieve information to recognize a conflict of this kind. From the present data we have found that this recognition is expressed directly in oral discussions. Remarkably, we did not discover it at all in any of the written papers submitted for this study. If discovering contradictions is an intellectual process we want to evaluate, we can find it in class discussions. We'll still need to check on where else we can find it.

To varying degrees the other categories also represent significant ways of thinking which may be evaluated.

Students may synthesize material they are studying with "outside" material. They do this in both speaking and writing, though the outside material is more likely to be from

internalized experience in the case of discussion and from external sources in the case of writing.

Linking ideas explicitly is a process also found in both speaking and writing.

Suggesting qualifications or reservations seems to be more prevalent in group discussion. Claims are more likely to be modified in speaking than in writing.

Internalizing, as represented by first person pronoun utilization, is also better detected in oral discussion, although it may perhaps be regarded as implicit in much student writing.

Tentativeness, including admission of uncertainty and even ignorance, is another element found only in the oral situation. It was never present in the written papers submitted for this study.

In conclusion, important intellectual processes defined as "readiness" may be observed in oral classroom discussion. They may be seen as representing dimensions of actve learning, some of which, it turns out, are not at all apparent in formal written papers on the same subject.

If one of our educational objectives is to encourage synthesis of ideas, then we can find evidence of its achievement in oral interaction. If we want to promote contradiction and challenge, if we value the tentative and exploratory, if we encourage internalization and commitment, then class discussions may be the place to look for signs of our success.

NOTE

Undergraduate research assistant Cheryl Noel participated in the recording and analysis of data.

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